

FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: December 10, 2012

Agenda Item: Milk River WMA Acquisition

Division: Fish and Wildlife

Action Needed: Final Approval

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 20 minutes

Background

The 4,500-acre Milk River Ranch, located along the Canadian border, about 45 miles northwest of Havre, includes a combination of Milk River bottom, native grassland and prairie breaks. These habitats support upland game birds, deer, antelope, elk, raptors and other nongame species, while the Milk River offers more than 10 miles of warm-water fishing opportunity. The long-time ranch owners expressed an interest in selling the property to public agencies to maintain its open space, agricultural, historic and scientific values. Montana DNRC is proposing to purchase about 1,513 acres of grazing and dry cropland, along with an 80-acre irrigated hay meadow, which meshes well with 4,000 acres that DNRC currently administers in and around the ranch. FWP proposes to purchase about 2,992 acres, including nearly all of the privately owned river bottom and associated breaks and upland habitats. Together with the DNRC holdings, an expanse of about 14 square miles would be available for habitat and public recreational access. The purchase price is \$4.7 million or \$1,570 per acre.

Public Involvement Process & Results

The draft environmental assessment public comment period ran from Oct. 17 through Nov. 9. The draft EA was available to the public on the FWP website and copies were mailed to surrounding landowners, Hill County Commissioners, and other interested agencies and individuals. There were two public notices of the acquisition in both the Havre Daily News and Great Falls Tribune. A public meeting was held in Havre on Oct. 30. There were approximately 65 people at the public meeting. There were two verbal comments made at the meeting regarding this proposal. Both verbal comments were against the acquisition by FWP. There have been an additional 51 comments received regarding the proposal, 31 have been in support of the proposal and 20 in opposition or raised concerns regarding the proposal.

Alternatives and Analysis

If this project is not funded, the property would likely be sold to another buyer. A new owner could develop the property or conduct other activities that might result in the loss of native wildlife habitats. Failure to purchase this property could result in a loss of public access for recreation. Failure of this project to proceed would also likely impact the associated DNRC land purchase of adjacent portions of the ranch.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends completion of the Milk River WMA property purchase.

Proposed Motion

I move that the FWP Commission approve FWP's purchase of the Milk River Ranch property.